Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
OOI2 Malekula OOI2

Small Islanders. These islands also form part of the dual organisation area, and were the seat of Codrington's main work. Northward of these, with a gap of some 150 miles, are the Santa Cruz Islands, famous for their feather money, some 200 miles to the westward of which lies San Christoval, the most southerly of the large Solomon Islands, whence it would be possible to reach the Asiatic continent without once losing sight of land.

Seasons.

The climate of the New Hebrides is one of the least variable in the world, leading, among other interesting results, to the fact that there is no regular breeding-season for birds, each species having adapted its life-cycle differently to conditions which allow of breeding at almost any time of the year.[1] Being somewhat aside from the main track of cyclones, it is on the whole rather less unhealthy than most parts of Melanesia. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the climate is uniformly moist and rain may fall any day of the year, two main seasons are sufficiently clearly marked off to have an important bearing on the economic and ritual life of the natives. The first coincides with the south-east trade wind that blows from about the middle of May till the end of October, with July as the coolest month, which, under favourable circumstances, somewhat resembles high summer in England. During these months, when there is almost always a cool breeze and sea and sky dazzle in the sunlight, the islands are comparatively free from malaria and the white man is grateful for a blanket at night. These are also for the natives of the Small Islands the months of plenty, during which the main yam crops are dug up and harvested, and during which most of the elaborate ritual activities take place. Towards the end of this season the marine annelid which white men call *palolo* appears during the night at certain phases of the moon. This phenomenon, heralded by the flowering of the erythrina tree in July, is eagerly watched for by the natives at certain stages of the moon's cycle during August and September, and its chief appearance on the twentieth night of the October-November moon is also the time when the dead return to visit the living, and marks the beginning of the New Year.[2]

This also marks the end of the comparatively cool, dry season. Now the prevailing wind veers round to the north-west, bringing with it a sultry equatorial heat. Clouds cover the sky, though still with intervals of brilliant sunshine, till in December squalls become frequent, continuing throughout January and culminating in February in the nearest approach to cyclones which these islands experience. This is also as a rule the hottest month of the year, and that in which fever and diseases are apt

[1] See the works of Dr. John Baker and Mr. T. H. Harrisson.

[2] The word *palolo* is probably of Samoan origin. Much misconception exists among white men regarding the appearance of this annelid. A detailed description of its various appearances and of its influence on the native calendar will be given in a future volume on Atchin.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
0012 Malekula 0012

to be most prevalent. Rain-storms and cloud continue to alternate with brilliant periods throughout March and April, till in May the pleasant season of trade winds once more begins. 132

Under these humid conditions the west coasts of all the larger islands suffer the most, the east coasts being more open to the refreshing trades. Most favourably situated of all are the Small Islands, which are among the most pleasant spots in the whole archipelago. Here the temperature rarely rises above 95° Fahrenheit, even in the hot weather, and though the moisture makes this feel much hotter than a similar temperature in a dry climate, the nights are nearly always cool.

Geology.

While the geological composition of the larger islands of the group varies and most are mountainous, the highest peak in Santo rising to a height of some 4500 feet, there is little doubt that the whole group owes its position above the surface of the ocean to volcanic action. There is on many islands, including Malekula, evidence that this action has taken place in abrupt stages, seen in the coral terraces that rise in giant steps, clothed in thick jungle, up the mountain-sides, each representing a sudden elevation of the land. Though this has doubtless been the general trend, contrary cases of submergence are also on record, such as that of two reefs situated between Atchin and Vao which formerly were populous islands, the story of whose submergence is told below.[1] 133

Except in the case of a few well-populated coral islets, however, all minor natural features are obscured from observation by a uniform mass of dark green bush formed of huge trees and tangled undergrowth coming right down to the shore of the larger islands, relieved only in some cases, as in North Malekula, by the light green of the bamboo groves capping the mountains which rise behind. Here and there, if one approaches closer, small groves of coconut trees close to the coast mark the presence of human habitation. But, owing to the necessity of sheltering their dwellings from the hurricanes, it is rare that any house is ever visible from the sea. Save for the meeting of an occasional canoe, however thickly the land may be populated, the only sign of life visible from a boat is in the season for burning the bush for new gardens, when tall columns of smoke may be seen from the interior climbing up into the still air. In most places, also, the coast is fringed with coral reefs, making approach dangerous except by means of the few channels carved through them by the fresh water from some mountain stream. 137 133

Fauna.

On the other hand, though the sea abounds with sharks and certain low-lying areas are infested with mosquitoes and fever, no native need 136

[1] See Chapter XXII.